

# History and the Gospel

Hugh Ross Mackintosh \*

1911

434

THE modern mind, as represented by certain well-known types, is obviously baffled by the claim of the Christian faith to rest on and revolve round events in time. It asks in tones of sincere mystification how eternal truth—the love of God or human victory over moral evil—is anywise dependent for its hold upon our intelligence on actual incidents in the past. Is there not even a grossness in the idea? If the Gospel is in itself true, no fusion or coalescence of it with special portions of the time-series can make its truth any less or more. Faith is the soul's adhesion to the living God; why then perplex the simplicity and candour of its attitude by insisting that the attitude in question is one which necessarily implies a specifically intellectual posture towards events of history? Why not rather concede that the protest against this

---

\*"History and the Gospel," *Expositor*, eighth series, 1 (1911): 434–49. Original version available on the Internet Archive. This version updated June 7, 2017.

is at bottom a religious one, as demanding only that honest men should be encouraged to remain in fellowship with the Church while yet as critics of tradition they suspend judgment on the historicity of alleged occurrences in the first century? Such is the argument in brief. It is remarkable, by the way, that an intensified disinclination to implicate religion with history should have become thus specially manifest in an age which gives to historical research, and to examination of the principles of evidence, a quite unprecedented proportion of time and energy. The more men know of the past, and its human ways, the less, apparently, they will allow it to mean for the present. But while in part this hesitation  
 435 may be owing to a quickened sense of the obstacles in the path of the historian who aims at certainty, and has perforce to be satisfied with probability, in ultimate origin and title it is not historical at all, but philosophic. Philosophy has always tended to regard historic fact as in the last resort negligible. Truth as such is timeless; from the final point of view the contingencies of the world-process leave it wholly unaffected.

As a general idea, this influential modern prejudice can be traced back to ancient speculation. The Greek view of things had no place for what we call history or progress. It aimed at dealing solely with the permanent and unchanged essence of the world, and it accepted mathematics as the perfect form of knowledge and as exclusively competent to guide the mind to cognition of τὸ ὄν—that which really

is. We must remember that Greek thought set out from the study, not of man,—who is made for history, and is “a creature of days and years and also of generations,”—but of physical nature. Hence the succession of human events was sternly reduced in significance to the second or third rank; it was something proper only to the realm of γένεσις, the sphere of change and incalculable variety, which can never satisfy the properly metaphysical interest. No one raised the problem of what progress means, or human history as a whole. No one inquired whether conceivably it has been “assigned to man to have history for the manner in which he should manifest himself,” and whether accordingly in our search for the meaning of the world we are bound not to stop short with principles, truths, laws because what we seek is given only in facts, events, historical transactions. This, let it be said again, did not present itself as a problem demanding to be faced; much less would a Greek thinker have dreamt that by this path we arrive (so far as may be) at the secret of the universe.

436

Yet the Greek mind could not fail utterly to devise its own equivalent for the modern conception of history as a teleological process on the great scale. And this equivalent it found in the idea of a continuous cycle of existence, with alternating periods of evolution and dissolution. All human events, it was held, are repeated time after time, endlessly. Thus for Plato the wheel of generation is eternal, as it had been also apparently for the

Pythagoreans; and in Aristotle we meet with the strongly marked principle that the process of the world of generation is a series of transitions without beginning or end. In the same way the Stoics held that the world course is reversible, the original state being perpetually restored. It is a theory, Hatch says, which "conceived of the universe as analogous to a seed which expands to flower and fruit and withers away, but leaves behind it a similar seed which has a similar life and a similar succession; so did one universal order spring from its beginning and pass through its appointed period to the end which was like the beginning in that after it all things began anew."<sup>1</sup> Conceptions of this kind are familiar in Neo-Platonism; they were revived by Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century.

437 A suggestive writer has pointed out that the persistence of this theory means that it is dealing with what appears a real difficulty to thought. It is hard to grasp "the reality of the process and admit a real increase and growth in the content or significance of the world. The force of facts compels to the admission that the world really progresses, really contains more than it did of the quality in terms of which the process is formulated, that its Becoming involves a progressive increase in Being. But in spite of the avowal of dynamical principles, the statical tendency to regard the amount of Reality as stationary irresistibly reasserts itself. The actual

---

<sup>1</sup> *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 205.

fact of growth cannot be denied, but its significance may be disputed. And so it is asserted to be merely *apparent*; it is really only the manifestations of the great *Cycle*, which reels off the appointed series of events in precisely the same order for ever and ever. It is therefore a mere illusion to fancy that the total content of the universe changes."<sup>2</sup> If this is true of ancient philosophy, absorbed in the phenomena of change in nature, it is true in a scarcely less degree of philosophy in modern times, whose first interest is the validity of knowledge, not the development of real existence. For much contemporary thought it is axiomatic that nothing real ever *moves*.

There was bound to be a change here, even in philosophy, when once ethical considerations had got the upper hand, for ethics apart from the idea of progress is unmeaning; yet too frequently it is forgotten that the badly needed corrective was already supplied even while the great Greek thinkers were at work. It was supplied in the message of the Hebrew prophets. To them the world owes the idea of a real history of things, a progress in time. No one, I suppose, would gravely contend that the Hebrews possessed the peculiar charism of the metaphysician. Saints with them are not speculative men. In view of death, for example, they do not argue that the soul is immortal from its nature; they feel that they are one with God, and that death cannot ever touch those who are folded on the bosom of

---

<sup>2</sup> *Riddles of the Sphinx*, p. 209.

the Eternal. In spite of their temperament, however, they have contributed certain well-marked elements of truth which must find a place in any sound philosophy. At each point they are seen to be foes of abstraction, bent unwaveringly on that mental attitude of concrete synthesis which insists on the undivided unity of Life. In proof we have only to recall their profound sense of the vital conjunction and co-operation of nature and spirit, the oneness of man's experience, the connexion of sin and death; which last is always held to have moral meaning. And it is the same intensely and incorruptibly concrete view which is implicit in the prophetic doctrine that human progress is real because its core and spring are ethical. History is a moral operation. The kingdom of God is coming on the earth. A redemptive purpose is being executed on the grand scale and will throw its results far on into coming ages. The fortunes of Israel are, in the last resort, the fortunes of mankind. If we like we may put this principle into language far enough away from the Old Testament, although natural to moderns, by saying that the conception of reality it implies is not merely statical, but dynamic. Reality, in other words, is not *per se* complete, finished, moveless; it is patient of increase and development and marches forward to a goal. It is a time-process, or at all events such a process is embraced within it. It is a scene of change, in which new facts emerge; yet not as the Greeks held of change which is finally unreal and non-significant. Rather its plastic movement is

laden with ultimate and eternal meaning.

Modern thought, as I have said, tends to interpret religion more from the Greek than the Hebrew point of view. It scarcely knows what to do with a historical religion. Indeed what has been called by far the strongest blow yet struck at Christianity is the famous word of Lessing: "Contingent historical truths can never become proof of necessary truths of reason." Fact is one thing, ideas are another, and between the two there is no inner or essential bond. Curiously enough, it was Lessing himself who did more than all his contemporaries to lift men above the strange and arid prejudice that history is only a wirr-warr of beings, happenings, relations, and to exhibit it as the workshop of life both for nations and persons. The education of mankind, regarding which he spoke many deep words, is in fact an education by way of historical media, moving upward from limited and meagre origins, yet attaining in due time to a heritage defined and enriched through the bygone experiences of man. But this is Lessing at his highest. Elsewhere he lapses as his neighbours do into the abstract rationalism for which religion is little more than a popular metaphysic; the kindergarten method by which the average man rises to the apprehension of high verities more fitly conceived by loftier minds in the timeless modes of speculative argument. And this is, of course, the authentic philosophical tradition. Spinoza, who strives like Plato to think as mathematically as he can, pronounces nothing else

to be essential for salvation but only knowledge of the Eternal Son of God, i.e. of Divine wisdom; so that if unquestionably it is advantageous to be aware of the historic Christ, yet is it in no way necessary, since the Divine life in man of which He is the symbol has come to abundant manifestation elsewhere. Kant follows in this line, contending that faith in the ideal Christ, in whom God-pleasing manhood has been exemplified, is the true faith which saves the soul and makes it blessed inwardly; and in perfect consistency with this, notwithstanding a willing admission that the ideal took shape and form in the historic Jesus, he does not hesitate to assert that the question whether Jesus' fulfilment of the ideal was complete and sinless is comparatively unimportant. Fichte crowns the series by the declaration that it is contrary to the Christian religion to demand faith in the historic Christ. If a man is in fact united to God,

440 his duty is not to be perpetually going back upon the idea of the *way* to such union, but to live in the thing.

This conception of Christianity without Jesus can be traced right down the theological movement of the nineteenth century; for it is never far from the surface when Hegelian or Neo-Hegelian writing touches on religion. We must dissociate the idea of redemption, it is said, from the person of an alleged Redeemer. It is not the way of the Idea to pour its fulness in a single Life. Rather it demands a multiplicity of co-ordinate and mutually supplementary individual instances for ever rising up



anew only to pass away in an infinite and uniform succession. This was altered by more Christian thinkers, such as Biedermann, into the less atheistic principle that ideas of the Fatherhood of God and the forgiveness of sins are indeed traceable to the mediation of Jesus, but only as it were by accident. Once they have been planted here, that is, they stand erect by their own weight. Of late, however, the tendency has shown itself to go back to yet more intransigent forms of expression. On the one hand, certain kinds of Modernism, pleading for the independence of faith and history, argue that the true refuge from the dangers of Gospel criticism is the merging of self in the universal Church as the brotherhood of aspiring men. On the other hand we have the controversy now afoot in Germany as to the existence of the historic Jesus. Drews' book on the Christ-myths, round which a small literature has gathered rapidly, is no doubt more interesting as a symptom than as a contribution. In other words, whatever its extravagance of statement, it is at least proof that multitudes of people are dissatisfied with the misty outlines and shifting content of the picture of Jesus so far drawn by modern liberal scholarship; and clear-sighted men like Johannes Weiss concede handsomely that for this dissatisfaction there is substantial ground. But the point for us to note is Drews' remedy for present ills. Throw away the "chopped straw" of radicalism, he tells us, and cut loose from history altogether. That persistent clinging to past fact has been the ruin of Christianity

from the first. In place of the historic Jesus take the ideal Christ; seize and hold the thought that God and man are indistinguishably one—the life of the world God's life, the prolonged sorrow of humanity but the self-redeeming passion of the Absolute—and at once the entanglements and uncertainties of the Church drop from her. The dead hand of the past is lifted off. Religion has no more concern with incidents of a bygone time. Such is the latest phase of the long-drawn controversy, and as before its origin and sanctions are philosophic, not religious. They are due to von Hartmann this time, not Hegel.

What answer can we give to this? What defence can be made of the Gospel as inwoven with history by unbreakable strands of living fibre? None perhaps that will prevail in the court of pure theory. Truth as it is in Jesus is morally conditioned and must needs be morally appreciated; and all labour is lost which affects to argue as though it were not so. But if the deepest things in spiritual experience be admitted as not valid merely, but constitutive and all-determining, the case for Jesus is strong indeed.

To begin, if it be said the Gospel as involved in history must consent to be as relative as other facts of the time-series—that it has to choose, in short, between historicity and finality—the answer is that this is pure assumption, and an assumption that will have to be changed if it conflicts with real phenomena. It may well be bad metaphysics; it is so, if, as not a few philosophers have begun to think, life is an eternal creation of novelties, a

scene not of self-identical persistent objects with unvarying mutual relations but of the incessant uprising of the new and unforeseen. For in that case the fatal presupposition of mechanism as an exhaustive conception of the real vanishes, and the only question remaining is whether the novelty created at a specific point in history was an absolute and all-sufficient Redeemer. Furthermore, it is to be remembered that the religious life of man has always moved upward, not by the influence of abstract conceptions, however rich or versatile, but by the power of great personalities. Each vast movement starts with a man. It rises into strength because an idea and a mind have become fused in one—the thought embodied in a soul, the soul dedicated to the thought and acting only in its service. This is unquestionably how concrete history has proceeded from phase to phase; it has moved by incessant new beginnings; and if the axioms of a mechanical psychology break down helplessly before a Paul, a Luther, or a Wesley, acknowledging their inability to deal with the original and inscrutable factors these names represent, it is hard to see how they can expect to cope with the incomparable life of Jesus. And to crown all, it has been found that *a priori* notions of relativity are extinguished in Jesus' presence. They are broken by redemption as an experience as of old Samson broke the restraining withes. The men who followed Christ in Palestine and learnt to call Him their Lord, those who in every time have felt the sweep of His power and

the renewing impetus of His Spirit—all these are somehow aware that in Jesus we touch the supreme moral reality of the universe. They are aware of this; and unavoidably they have proceeded to make unique assertions regarding this unique Person. And whatever be the defects of these assertions in language or conception they at least proclaim the infinitude of Jesus, and the intrinsically hopeless character of all efforts to compute His place who is

443

the star to every wandering bark  
Whose worth's unknown, although his  
height be taken.

Drews' reiteration of the old difficulty that nothing past can be vital to a religion which demands a present object, is at first sight more impressive. Yet only at first sight. On these terms life may be spiritually enriched by Jesus Christ as by Socrates, but in no other sense. Ideas or principles may be taken from the Gospel provided we renounce facts. If Jesus is historical, He can only be a dead or dying influence of the past. How often this attempt has been made to put Jesus back firmly into His own age; to hold Him there (so to speak) a prisoner chained by time's limitations, a figure dimmer always and more distant with the lapse of generations! Yet one touch of experience breaks the spell. It is found that Jesus is only past while we refuse to think of Him. Let the question be taken up in moral earnest and at once He steps forward from the page of history, a tremendous and exacting reality. We cannot read

His greatest words, be they of command or promise, without feeling that He is saying these things to us now *unter vier Augen*; that we are as much face to face with decision for or against Him as Zaccheus or Pilate. He gets home upon our conscience in a manner so final and inevitable—even when we do not wish to have anything to do with Him—that we see and know Him as present to the mind. Like any other reality He can be kept out of consciousness by the withdrawal of attention. But once He has got in, and, having got in, has shown us all things that ever we did, He moves out of the past into the field of immediate knowledge and takes the central place in the soul now and here. It is plain that at this point a living conscience about sin is crucial. Jesus must always remain a historical externality to the man who will not admit Him to the moral sense.

444

It is in this direction also that we find the solution of a further problem. Granted that there was once a Jesus Christ, it may be said, can anything be ascertained regarding Him? Has not Gospel criticism evacuated our knowledge of all certainty? And without certainty, what is religious faith? Surely the record of Jesus' career has been proved to be shot through with essentially unverifiable elements. Not even the details of Mark are beyond question. And short of verbal inspiration, the possibility of an influx of later legend cannot be denied. Where shall we draw the line? I believe that in popular usage no charge against the New Testament is more common or more effective than this charge that you

cannot draw a distinct line between the certain and the uncertain, and that everything, accordingly, is pretty much on one level of untrustworthiness. As is the case so often, too, the impressiveness of the charge lies in the fact that it represents a significant half-truth. Nothing in the past can be so certain for the historian, *purely as a historian*, as that it will bear the weight of personal religion. History can no more give us a Saviour Christ than science can give us the living God. Even if Christ was the world's Redeemer, and knowable as such, it is not anyhow by way of historical research that He could be thus known. There are matters, in short, which history by itself is incompetent to treat of; for, as Professor James puts it, "a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth, if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule."

That, however, is but a preliminary point. The really important thing is that no man is a mere historian, even if he tries to be. For no man is without a conscience—the sense of unconditional and infallible obligation; hence none can be guaranteed  
445 against the risk of finding himself in the presence of One who deals with us in ways which we know to be God's ways. It may happen to any man, at any time, given the witness of a living Church, to be inescapably confronted with a Person who convicts him of moral ruin yet offers him the saving love of God. And if this should happen, he will then know, with a certainty which no history can give

or take away, that in this Jesus he has touched and met with God. Here then is the answer to Lessing's objection about contingent truths of history. It is not merely that history is crammed with purpose, and nothing anywhere in it quite contingent; it is yet more emphatically that to call the fact of Christ contingent has no meaning. Contingent in this sense is peripheral, subordinate, adventitious; Jesus is central, vital, paramount. So far from being a chance detail of the world, He is the last and highest fact of which moral reason takes cognisance.

But to have found Jesus in history, and to have become assured that in Him we encounter God Himself, are experiences which cannot fail to modify very profoundly our view of history as such. If the supreme Reality has been manifested in a Person who once lived, and—conscience being witness—still lives, it is clear that what happens within "the bounds of time and place" must function substantively in the plan of being. History, in other words, is not, as philosophy has so often contended, like the screen of a cinematograph, on which we see the moving symbols of independently real things, the symbols themselves being only shadows after all, but no true or abiding contribution to existent fact. On the contrary, it is a domain in which God is bringing reality to pass. Time and the contents of time have no merely negative relation to eternal truth; rather is supremely valid truth being freely actualised by their instrumentality. The elements of history are plastic and susceptible in the hand of

446 God. For Him the course of the world is no external fate by which He is confronted, and with which He too must somehow come to terms; its multiplicity and mutation, with the reality of progress and movement these imply, constitute a sphere for creative action that weaves into the cosmic texture the dominating pattern of redemptive love.

History then is such that salvation may come by way of it. In the foregoing pages I have contended that it is bad philosophy to view the realities of history as only so much second-class matter. But religion, I imagine, will go a step further. It will plead that salvation *must* be mediated through history. Humanity can be saved only from within. Even for the Redeemer Himself it was essential that redemption should be accomplished for us, not by a divine fiat, a great commanding word spoken from heaven, but by a life being lived and a death died within the world and as real parts of the time-series. And this was the lot appointed for Jesus. He too learnt obedience by the things that He suffered; and being made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.

But, apart from such high matters, we can perceive that any redemption which is to be apprehensible by men must be historically conveyed, since it is obviously incidental to human life as such to be constituted by historical relationships. Evil and good alike reach us through the influences of the past; through persons who, whether by heredity or by example, have co-operated in moulding us;



and for the supreme forces of religion also, if they are to possess the world, it will be natural and necessary to approach and capture the souls of men in ways similarly concrete. Now this actualisation of redemption within the phenomenal order is possible for God. Just because He is transcendent it is possible for Him to appear in time in the form of one finite spirit, while yet not losing Himself,—like von Hartmann's unhappy Absolute,—in the fatal and debasing labyrinth of multiplicity. Creation was built on lines such as to admit of the influx of vast redemptive forces one day to be liberated by the divine love. In this basal sense all must recognise the Lutheran axiom *finitum capax infiniti*—the finite can receive and assimilate Infinitude. And since ideas in themselves are impotent, the Infinite One came personally as a Saviour. Abstract humanity may be saved by abstract conceptions, real men and women only by a concrete Life. Love is of God, therefore God must live beside us that His love and its sacrifice may be known to created spirits and may win back their love. So Browning thought of it:

447

What lacks then of perfection fit for God,  
 But just the instance which this tale affords  
 Of love without a limit? So is strength,  
 So is intelligence; let love be so  
 Unlimited in self-sacrifice  
 Then is the tale true and God shows complete.

The foregoing argument has a close bearing on

the doctrine of Atonement; a brief note on that subject, therefore, may be added here. If history be fully real, it must figure concretely and decisively in the relations of God and man. Now what is known as the moral theory of Atonement contains elements of profound truth, in that it contemplates Christ as the gift and act of God Himself and lifts the problem clean above all categories of law and barter by its accentuation of God's free grace, who had no need to be induced to love us, but gave His only-begotten Son out of a love as old and uncreated as His being. All this, fortunately, is the common property of all Christian theories.

448 Yet the religion of the New Testament provides, as it seems to me, a deeper and more solemn undertone. It conveys the truth, dimly yet significantly, that Jesus' life and death represent not a mere disclosure of God's relation to the sinful, but a change in it. It was indeed a revelation, but a revelation contributing to the reality it revealed. To recall our former illustration, history in this central tract of it is no mere lantern-screen on which are thrown pictures of independently real fact; rather it is the workshop and laboratory in which fact itself comes to be. In virtue of something which has happened, something which would not have happened apart from Jesus, sinners now have God on their side in a new way. His judgment on sin has been manifested once and for ever; but it has been manifested in the actualities of the phenomenal series, and, by its very occurrence, has produced a new situation between

the Father and His wandering children.

So that after all we are led back to the fundamental problem: Is the relation of God to man a static relation, as immutable and intrinsic as the ratio holding between two given numbers, or is it interpretable in genuinely personal categories; susceptible, therefore, of change, growth, enrichment, consummation? Has the Cross any causal bearing—not on the originative and fontal love of God, but—on His present gracious attitude to the guilty? Or shall we apply also at this point the monistic principle that nothing real ever moves, that all happenings are *ipso facto* appearance, not reality? To me it seems that if history is the fruitful sphere and nidus of being; if it is this, and not merely an earthly representation and picturing of eternal truths—of validities, that is, which hold good irrespectively of all that may *become* in time and space—then we are obliged to think of salvation as deriving reality, acquiring substantial and effective existence, from concrete events of time. Christ, that is, does more than unveil a relation already posited by the very definition of Divinity and Humanity; He once for all establishes a new relation, at a great cost. True, this argument is worthless if God is not in fact angry at sin; if, because He is love unspeakable, He cannot be wrath as well. But we can only say so if we disregard the voice of the instructed Christian conscience, which tells us plainly that we question God's anger at sin only because we are so little angry at it ourselves. And if the wrath of God be a

dread reality, not as a quasi-human passion, but as the reaction of pure holiness against moral evil, then it is possible to hold that right had to be done by that morality which is, as Butler puts it, "the nature of things," and that by His life and death Jesus Christ achieved this great task. There is a homage due to the righteous will of God, which we cannot render of ourselves, but which in the acts and endurances of an historic life He rendered for us. There was a divinely produced increase in the content and significance of the world. And all this is possible, ultimately, because God is the God of history, who in Jesus makes a new start in His connexion with the sinful, thus altering and rectifying, in ethical and spontaneous ways, the relationship which had previously obtained.